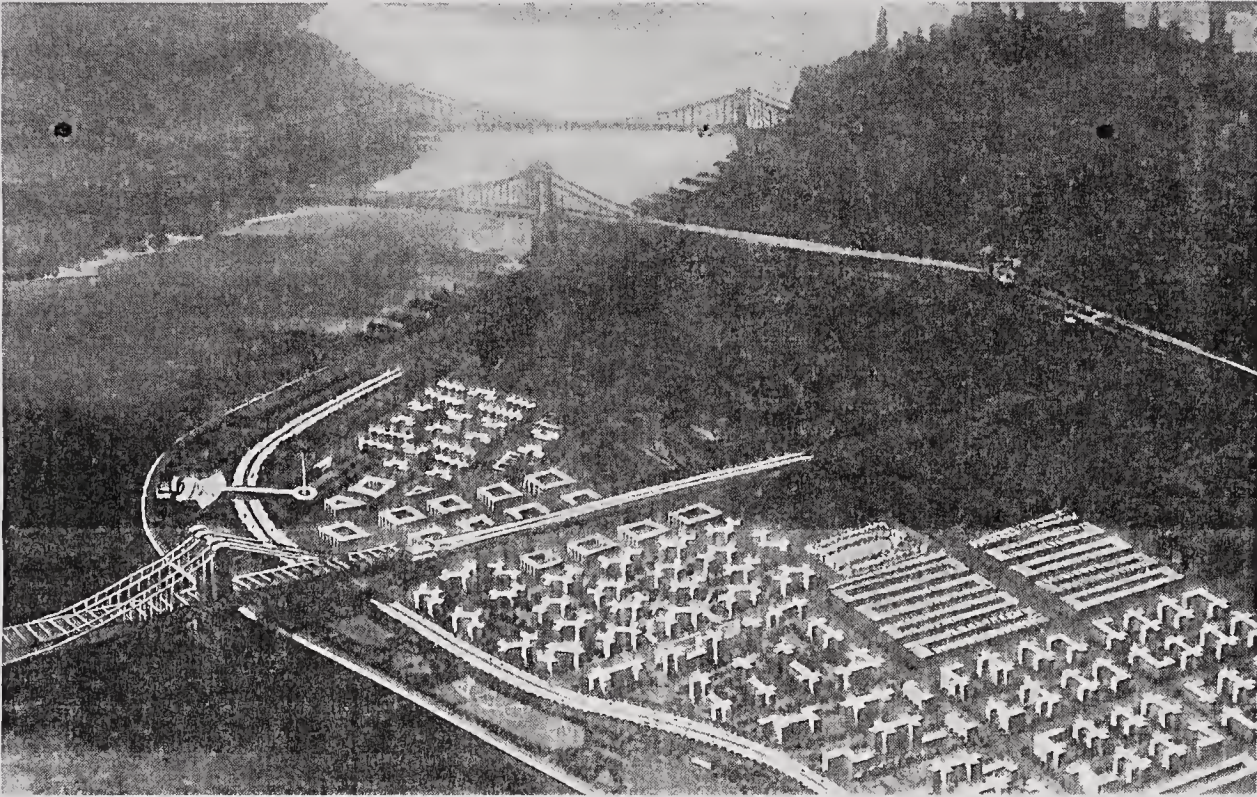


Deciphering the City's Hidden Code

Is That a Mountain or a Sidewalk?

BY J.A. LOBBIA

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE PHOTOGRAPH AT THE STOREFRONT FOR ART & ARCHITECTURE GALLERY LOOKS LIKE AN AERIAL VIEW OF A BEAUTIFUL DARK SLATE MOUNTAIN SURROUNDED BY GRAY STONY VALLEYS, AND RUN THROUGH WITH RIVERS SO SHINY THEY SEEM BLACK. ♪ A SECOND GLANCE—AND A LOOK AT THE CAPTION—CHANGES EVERYTHING. WHAT WAS A REMOTE SPECTACLE OF NATURE IS INSTEAD AN EVERYDAY, LITERALLY PEDESTRIAN OBJECT:



COURTESY NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION ARCHIVES/ROBIN HOLLAND

a scrap of worn sidewalk, cracked and repeatedly mended with veins of tar. In a city with 11,000 sidewalk miles, a bumpy patch hardly merits mention in an art gallery. But this one illustrates a legal issue known as a “sidewalk trip hazard.”

It is one of dozens of commonplace urban items—fire escapes, accessibility ramps, violation notices—that are used to explain the arcane and impenetrable rules that shape ordinary New York experiences, in a show called “Building Codes: The Programmable City”.

“We designed this with two points in mind,” says Rosten Woo of the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), who with the Storefront, curated this show, which opened July 19. “We wanted to disseminate information and to provide a sense that these things are in fact knowable. This is about the whole history of political struggle that has changed the built environment.”

The installation includes about two dozen exhibits on topics ranging from the 1901 Tenement House Act to the Rent Guidelines Board to zoning laws. Lucite models, for instance, demonstrate a crucial planning guideline called floor-area-ratio (FAR), the mathematical formula that determines how bulky a building can be, and sheds light on why some are low, ugly cubes while others tower. If you’re wondering how Donald Trump got to build his monstrous 90-story edifice near the United Nations, check out the installation on transferable development rights. They allow a developer to buy “air rights” from neighbors and erect structures of a scale that would otherwise be illegal.

Or maybe you’re curious about what moti-

vates businesses like Sony or IBM to cede precious midtown real estate and provide mini parks for the public. Corporate goodwill? It’s more about the city forcing some manners on the altitudinally greedy. “Incentive zoning” allows excess height and bulk, provided the public gets a treat. The corporations let us idle in their atria; the city lets them pierce the sky and block the sun.

While the show covers much more than the actual city building code (the 724-page tome that includes everything from barbecues to dry-wall specifications), it treats the word *code* literally, exploring how laws and regulations encrypt society’s minimum and maximum standards. The 1901 Tenement House Act, for instance, made it mandatory that landlords provide one indoor toilet for every two families. The entire rent-regulation system is a codification of the belief that the city is in a housing emergency that requires government intervention.

The show is not only pedagogic. Among its most interesting features is the section on proposals, which range from the sensible plan of the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development to commit at least \$10 billion over the next decade to construct 100,000 affordable apartments, to the radical goal of the city’s largest landlord lobby, the Rent Stabilization Association (RSA), for “the gradual elimination of rent regulations through vacancy decontrol.” Here is also the project of artist-activist Michael Rakowitz, called paraSITE.

From December 1999 until April 2001, Rakowitz built 14 “inflatable” homeless shelters by taping together plastic bags that were in turn attached to the heating systems of buildings, si-

“BUILDING CODES” INCLUDES THIS RENDERING OF CITY PLANNING CZAR ROBERT MOSES’S VISION OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE, CIRCA 1940.

phoning warm air into cardboard boxes. Defining a parasite in biological terms—an organism that exploits the energy of a host—Rakowitz makes it clear that paraSITE is not an artist’s stab at policy. “This project does not present itself as a solution,” Rakowitz wrote. “It is not a proposal for affordable housing.” Instead, the shelters were “a station of dissent and empowerment.”

Like a school lesson, “Building Codes” has a vocabulary component. Those who want to expand their bureaucratese can stop by the “Lexicon” installation and study laminated cards drawn from building codes and legal documents. My favorite word is *curtilage*—sharing intimate space with people who have little relationship to you. Think outhouses, down-the-hall toilets, and even commonwalls apartment buildings, which unnerved early upper-class New Yorkers used to townhouses. The show even has a pamphlet on “The Revanchist City.” I had to look that up, too.

Less semantically challenging is the 48-minute video that juxtaposes interviews with 18 building experts—architects, supers, tenant advocates, landlord lobbyists, city commissioners—covering an array as broad as the exhibit itself. Jack Freund of the RSA complains that housing court and rent agencies “set up all these forums for contests, and every time you create one of them you create a forum for animosity” between landlords and tenants. Tenants, on the other hand, “are deathly afraid of landlords,” says tenant Sandra Rutherford, “and landlords know it.”

Architect and critic Michael Sorkin susses out the relative design importance of government codes versus “the whole set of corporate and commercial codings that influence the shape of things.” Architects are probably more attentive, says Sorkin, to “the way Wal-Mart predicts what space is going to be developed in Taiwan” than to municipal rules. Brooklyn College sociology professor Sharon Zukin dismisses the jargon of codes. “You never want to take a walk with me,” she warns. “I could tell you what was on a site before, or what it was used for, or why it was built there. My research takes away the mystery of the city.”

Most poetic is artist Martha Rosler’s parallel between her childhood awareness of her body and her growing understanding of the physical city. “I realized that my body was not a solid thing but had structural elements that were hidden from view. . . . And I remember I used to be amazed when they excavated the sidewalk and there was dirt underneath. And then you begin to realize that there are counterparts in terms of policy to the fact that something is paved over. . . . You can’t help but feel that you are implicated in an incredibly complex socio-mechanical system.”

Most of “Building Codes” is not so lofty. There is the fanciful: Staffers from CUP and the Storefront worked with Art Start, a program for homeless kids aged five to 12, to design buildings using crates. Pipe cleaners and felt squares designate rooftop playgrounds and pools; one child appropriated the entire top floor of a five-story building for a single occupant and dubbed it the “millionaire home floor.”

The exhibit’s last installation, tucked into a narrow corner, speaks volumes about codes and cultures. It is a 12-minute videotape by Francisca Benitez documenting the annual installation of sukkah booths among the Satmar Jews of Williamsburg who, each autumn, fulfill a Talmudic order by living outdoors for seven days. The urban application of this ancient dictum means the construction of hundreds of temporary plywood shacks, most affixed to balconies or fire escapes. They do not meet the city code; in fact, Benitez says, they “drive the fire department nuts” because they block egress.

Benitez describes her video as “a portrait of an ephemeral city that appears within the ‘permanent city.’” In following the ancient religious codes of the Talmud, secular rules give way. ♪

“Building Codes” runs through August 25 at the Storefront, 97 Kenmare Street.